

Jonathan Munshaw: Hello, everyone. This is Jonathan Munshaw at the Library of Congress. I am sitting down today with Karen Keninger, the director of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped at the Library of Congress. Karen just completed her first full year as director back in March and is looking to bring NLS to the forefront of handicapped library services in the United States. How are you today, Karen?

Karen Keninger: I am well, thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Jonathan Munshaw: So, first of all, just start off by telling me the responsibilities as director.

Karen Keninger: The National Library Service program has approximately 120 staff and so part of my job is obviously to oversee the whole program, including the staff in Washington, DC. And then we have about 100 libraries throughout the country that are cooperating with us to provide our services. So, my job is to oversee that entire program and to look at what's coming up in the future and plan to basically have visioning and leadership responsibilities as well.

Jonathan Munshaw: And would you mind describing to me the career path that led you to this position and how you got to the library?

Karen Keninger: Certainly. When I was seven years old, began my career path toward this position, I think, because when I was seven years old, I got my very first books in Braille from the library that's one of the cooperating libraries for the national network. I grew up in Iowa and I began to read braille when I was seven and that was the beginning of my love for this program which now serves over half a million of Americans who can't read standard print because of visual or physical disabilities. So, I started there and went through high school and college using the program services. I worked at a number of jobs and raised a family and then went back and got a master's degree and was hired by the Iowa department for the blind to write grants, oversee some grant projects and to do some other administrative sorts of work.

And in 2000, I was sent up to the Iowa Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped as the interim director when the director had left and I was captivated by the possibilities of that library. And when the permanent position became open, I applied and was appointed to that position. And I worked in that position for eight years, bringing that library forward in many areas, I think in our recording program in transition from our cassette program to the digital program that NLS has now and also, just modernizing a number of things in the library. In 2008, the position of Director of the Iowa Department for the Blind became available and I applied for that at the urging of a number of my colleagues. I was appointed to that position in 2008 and that position oversaw not only the Iowa Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped but also the vocational rehabilitation program and the independent living program and adult orientation and adjustment center and a business enterprises program.

So, it was a multi-faceted program that I oversaw for four years. And then this position became open and again, I was encouraged to apply and I thought this would be a very exciting way to end my career, coming back to a program that I've loved since I was seven and looking at bringing this program forward into the modern era of technology and just moving everything forward.

Jonathan Munshaw: And you've only been here for a little over a year now but already, the NLS has organized the first ever braille literacy conference. Would you mind telling me a little bit about the goals of the conference and the outcomes of putting it on?

Karen Keninger: Certainly. Braille is, for a person who is blind, the primary literacy medium. That's what replaces print. Letter for letter, comma for comma, braille is my literacy medium. The people that we serve in the National Library Service primarily, for the most part, are not braille readers for a number of reasons but there is a significant percentage who are.

In the past several years, we have been working very diligently on our audio program to bring that forward from the cassette-based program that it was into a digital based program. And that's been very successful. But the braille program has, I will say, languished during that time because the focus was not on the braille program. Meanwhile, the braille program has a need to be modernized just as the audio program did and what I'm looking for in organizing this conference was for direction for the National Library Service program for braille. We brought together a number of about 100 people from various corners of the braille world.

We had braille literacy professionals. We had braille readers. We had braille technology professionals, braille production experts. We had some braille people who are involved in policymaking. We had some parents.

We had a wide variety of people who looked at the whole issue of braille literacy from a number of angles. And the goal was to have this group of people tell us what they thought NLS particularly and the world of braille in general should be doing to carry it forward into the 21st century. We spent three days talking about it from a number of different angles and we got, what I believe, were some very solid recommendations from the group.

Jonathan Munshaw: And what were some of the recommendations that they gave? Would you mind just giving me some examples?

Karen Keninger: Certainly. I think one of the top recommendations was that NLS should provide a braille e-reader for people who could use it throughout the country. Braille e-readers are expensive right now and they're not available to the average reader that we have because of the cost and NLS is not in a position to do that at the moment. But as the technology improves and changes and we're hoping that that will be within the next four or five years that we will be able to look at that kind of service to the people that we service. That was one of the top recommendations.

They also recommended that we have more braille training materials, that we have more of a collaborative and outgoing or outward looking promotional program for braille so that the people could understand better what the value of braille is. It seems to be bit misunderstood these days. And also, some other things such as bringing tactile drawings back into our hard copy braille and providing braille on-demand rather than the way that we've always done it which is to make X number of copies and to distribute them to the libraries and circulate whichever ones circulate. So, those are some of the primary recommendations that came out of the program.

Jonathan Munshaw: And this kind of Ð my next question, it kind of ties back into what you were just saying about one of the recommendations being an e-reader. Because when you first were named to the director position, you said that one of the goals for NLS is to enhance the reading experience for all NLS patrons by leveraging current and future technologies. So, are there any technologies that NLS is working on that may come up in the next couple of years?

Karen Keninger: Yes. One of the things that we're doing right now and hope to be able to release within the next month or so is an app for the iPhone/iPad/iPod family and that will be [Clears throat] Ð excuse me Ð with that app, you'll be able to read our braille books and you'll be able to read our audio books. With the braille books, you'll need a braille display to go with it but that's going to be something, I think, that's going to be very popular. We've already been getting a lot of interest in the app and as we've demonstrated it at consumer conventions and other places, we've had a lot of very positive feedback. So, the one for the Apple based products, the IOS based products, is coming out very soon.

The one for the Ð we're doing another one for the Android operating system and that one is a little bit behind because the accessibility in the Android system has been not as advanced as what's in the IOS system. But that's coming out as well. So, those are a couple of things that I think are going to be very imminent and very popular. We're also going to be looking at using text to speech not for our primary reading that will be human narrated, but there are pieces of books that we sometimes don't do because they're not interesting enough, the cost is there, whatever, to do an entire narration of them. For example, a long bibliography or an index or all of the notes.

We would call those Ðskipable elementsÓ and if somebody wanted to read them, we're looking at possibilities of using text to speech to put those pieces of books in so that the people who wanted them could read them and the people who didn't care about them could just skip them. So, those are just some of the things that are coming up right now.

Jonathan Munshaw: Hm-hmm. And you also said that you wanted to increase NLS readership by 20 percent over the next five years. And is there anything that NLS is doing or plans on doing to increase that readership?

Karen Keninger: Absolutely. One of the things that I think is going to increase the readership is, in fact, the apps for the iPhone and the Android systems. I think that's going to attract a group of people who are currently not using our programs because they'll be able to download directly from our barred reading & our barred site, which is our download site. They'll be able to download directly into their iPhones or other devices and read on these mainstream devices. So that, I think, is going to be very popular.

We also are working with the Bureau of Engraving and Printing and we will be helping them to distribute a currency reader as part of a project that they have. However, we think that that will also help us to get the word out about our program to people who may otherwise not have heard about it. So, we're kind of tandem with that advertising. There's some other things we're doing to increase partnerships with various organizations who serve people who would be eligible for our services and we are in the process right now of looking at contracting with an organization to do public education and outreach on a national scale for us as well. So, those are some of the initiatives that we're working on right now.

Jonathan Munshaw: Okay. In your time at the library, have you ever come across anything that has really surprised you or wowed you about the library that maybe you didn't see or didn't have the opportunity to work with in some of your other jobs?

Karen Keninger: Coming to Washington, DC has been really quite an experience and one of the things that I did not expect and have been delighted about is the concert series at the library and also the exhibits that are ongoing here. I have had the opportunity to take advantage of those since I'm living here and I've been really intrigued by that. But the other side of the & the other thing that has been really exciting to be is all of the digitization that the library's undertaking because that makes material that had previously been inaccessible to me as a print document, it makes it much more available to me as person who might be interested in researching. And so I'm very excited about that project as well, that whole overall program.

Jonathan Munshaw: Hm-hmm. And getting off of the library and your position, just talking a little bit more about you is & could you just tell me an interesting fact about yourself or do you have any hobbies or experiences that you'd like to share?

Karen Keninger: [Laughs] Well, interesting fact, I guess & one of the joys of my life is my family. I have six grown children, all in professional jobs and that's a very exciting part of my life, ongoing. They're mostly back in Iowa so I've been missing them. I also & hobbies wise, I guess, I like to read & not too surprising. I like to write and I also love tandem biking. We've done some long distance tandem bike trips in the past and hope to be able to do that some more.

Jonathan Munshaw: Okay. Well, that's all the questions I have for you today. Once again, I've been speaking to the director of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped at the LOC, Karen Keninger. Thank you for joining me today, Karen.

Karen Keninger: It's been my pleasure. Thank you.

Jonathan Munshaw: For more information on the NLS, visit
LOC.gov/NLS.

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